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EN 375

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The Queering of Family Values in *Angels in America*

“There are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics” (Millennium Approaches, Act III, Scene 2)

Introduction: Family Values and the Intimate Public Sphere

Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1992-1995), subtitled “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” is a two-part epic that takes place over the course of five years in New York City during the height of the Reagan administration and the start of the Bush administration. *Angels* features an ensemble cast of self-loathing Jews, ex-drag queens, prophets, closeted gay Mormons, Roy Cohn, a Valium-addicted housewife, and a council of Continental Principalities (the titular angels.) The play exists both in a mystical and fantastical realm, and the “real” world deeply rooted in the politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s, making it one that is simultaneously magical and strongly tethered to its time in history.

As Louis Ironson (a gay Jewish man, who is often read as a stand-in for Kushner) says in Act Three of *Angels*, nothing in America exists other than the political. Ironson’s declaration characterizes the entirety of the play, as even when Kushner’s writing is not overt in its political nature, it can all be traced back to conservative politics in the 1990s and the supposed threat of multiculturalism against the hegemony of straight, white men. *Angels* tells the story of Prior

Walter, a gay man who is diagnosed with AIDS at the beginning of the play. As his condition declines throughout the first few scenes, his partner Louis leaves him, and he begins to have visions of an angel (played by the same actress who plays his nurse when he is hospitalized later in the play) who tells him that he is a prophet who must tell the human race to stop any forms of social progress. The angel serves as a pillar of the neoconservative ideals held by Reagan and his contemporaries, as well as a physical manifestation of Prior's disease. The angel upholds the platforms of conservative politicians who promoted "family values" and maintaining sociopolitical hegemony of straight white men in the face of liberal multiculturalism. If Prior and humanity "stop moving"(172) as is commanded of them by the divine Principalities, they will uphold the reactionary politics of Reaganite republicans, and promote the demise of those affected by the AIDS epidemic.

The play is an amalgam of magical realism and political theater, representing real life and political issues on the stage in a manner that echoes the cultural moment in which *Angels* exists, while also using more symbolic means to create dramatic tension. As a piece of dramatic literature, *Angels* contains both stage directions which give information on the setting and the actions of the characters, grounding the play in truth, and dialogue, which is much less objective and shows the motives and impression management of the characters. The "gay fantasia" of the play stems from the character of Prior, his prophetic visions, and his revelatory dreams, in which he is dressed in drag and can interact with other characters, as well as the interactions of the mostly queer cast of characters in the play. Instead of following the conventions of other works of queer theater in the 1990s (namely Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*), Kushner does not just realistically represent the AIDS epidemic and the policies which prevented queer individuals from getting proper treatment due to a systemic lack of care for the gay community. Instead, he

integrates these themes into the symbols of the play, so it is both an escape from reality, and an expression of the pervasiveness of these issues; even when in a fantasia, queer individuals must deal with the effects of the political regimes which stand in opposition to their livelihood.

Conservative politics in the 1980s into the 1990s turned toward the resurgence of “family values” as core aspects of what a public persona should embody and uphold. These values (promoted by Reagan, Bush, and other conservative political figures) came out of identity politics, and cisgender, straight, white men having an identity placed upon them, instead of being deemed the default person in society. This led to the fantasy of the hegemony of cisgender, straight, white manhood being threatened by individuals with differing identities, and the introduction of the “culture wars” along identity lines and political lines. At the outset of her book *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant discusses the role of the intimate and the private becoming part of the public personas of political figures in the 1980s and 1990s. Berlant writes that “during the rise of the Reaganite right, a familial politics of the national future came to define the urgencies of the present. Now everywhere in the United States intimate things flash in people’s faces: pornography, abortion, sexuality, and reproduction; marriage, personal morality, and family values...” (1). She goes on to state that instead of concerns surrounding sexuality, the body, and family units remaining in the private sphere, they are upheld as mainstays of what America and American political figures stand for. The bridging of the intimate and the public, however, does not allow for a progressive perception of sexuality and family, but deems the white, heteronormative nuclear family as appropriate for the public sphere, and anything outside of this specific niche as being inappropriate, or in opposition to “family values.” Thus, marking members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color as

Other, and inappropriate to be represented in the public sphere, as their existence is not in accordance with the systemic ideal.

Patricia Hill Collins further defines the concept of family values in her essay, and explores how the family unit intersects with gender, race, and nation (63). Collins writes that after former vice president Dan Quayle used the term “family values” in a speech in 1992 there was a major influx in the use of the phrase in the popular press, showing that it resonated with the public. Collins writes that “situated in the center of ‘family values’ debates is an imagined traditional family ideal. Formed through a combination of marital and blood ties, ideal families consist of heterosexual couples that produce their own biological children. Such families have a specific authority structure; namely, a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife, and children” (Collins 62). Thus, the depiction of the family associated with “family values” is one that is straight, blood-related, and stratified along sex lines to delineate power to the male paternal figure. Collins also argues that the image of the family resonates so highly within American society due to its projection of the idea of equality. In a fully functioning family unit, every member should theoretically have their role that cannot be played by anyone else, making each part of the family equally important. However, with the idea of a man as the head of the household, authority is associated with maleness, and is, thus, deemed natural for men to hold authority over others, reinforcing institutional forms of patriarchy. In turn, the whiteness, cisness, and straightness of the family unit, with a man as the figurehead, becomes a symbol for society-at-large, assuming that there is a racialized, sexualized, and gendered hierarchy in America.

In *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner disassembles the concept of family values, and ideals promoted by neoconservative Reaganites by having the traditional family units on the stage fall

apart by the end of the play. The beginning of the play introduces the audience to the characters of Joe and Harper Pitt, a heterosexual married couple who, at first glance, appear to be fully functioning, or even thriving. Joe is a clerk working at a high-profile law firm in New York City, and Harper is a doting stay-at-home housewife. These two clearly represent the idealized family unit in conservative politics, as they are the only heterosexual pairing in the text, and Joe is one of the few Republican characters (he voted for Reagan, “twice!”), and the pair are even attempting to have a child in order to maintain their relationship. We learn very quickly in the first part of the play that Harper is a Valium addict and agoraphobe who is not actually capable of maintaining the household duties imposed upon her, and Joe is a closeted homosexual who later develops a sexual relationship with one of the other gay male characters in the play (Louis, Prior’s ex-boyfriend.) Thus, even though Tony Kushner sets up a conventional family unit at the outset of the play, it is almost immediately subverted, to show the instability of an institution deemed central to American society.

Joe’s mentor in the play is a fictionalized version of Roy Cohn, Joseph McCarthy’s right-hand man during the Second Red Scare, a period of political repression and fear of Communist influences from Soviet spies in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Along with being one of the chief prosecutors during the McCarthy trials, Cohn went on to be an informal advisor and close friend to Ronald Reagan, and a mentor to Donald Trump. Cohn is another representation of conservatism in the play, via his promotion of family values, as well as his white supremacy and homophobia. This version of Cohn (like the real-life equivalent) is another character who is diagnosed with AIDS, a disease that was strongly associated with homosexual men, and was notoriously ignored by Reagan, Bush, and other conservative politicians, as the epidemic that was deemed to be inappropriate to be discussed in the intimate public sphere.

At the end of his essay on the role of utopia and queerness (both on a sexual level, and on the level of “queering” or subverting social norms) within *Angels*, David Savran writes that “*Angels* queers the America of Joseph Smith—and Ronald Reagan—by placing an oppressed class at the very center of American history, by showing it to be not just the depository of a special kind of knowledge, but by recognizing the central role that it has had in the construction of a national subject, polity, literature, and theatre” (227). In having a group of mostly queer, marginalized individuals as the protagonists of the play, Kushner is able to tell the story of those who are marginalized and excluded from national narratives of identity politics, and core values of American society. This paired with having a central character who is based on a real-life political figure die from the disease that plagued thousands of individuals repressed under his party’s regime, expresses the immorality of Reaganite neo-conservatism, using Roy Cohn’s moral bankruptcy and physical decay as manifestations of these ideals. In contrast to Roy is Prior Walter, the other major character with AIDS: a prophet, and one of the more vocal dissenters of Reaganite politics. Prior is well again at the end of the play, whereas Roy has died, making the Reaganite a diseased hypocrite, and the representation of liberal multiculturalism, a supposed threat to straight white maleness, alive, enlightened, and part of a newly formed family unit (consisting of a gay Jewish man, a Mormon woman, and a black ex-drag queen).

***Angels* and Queer Theater:**

Angels, along with *The Normal Heart* (1985), and *Rent* (1994), are three of the most well-known and highly regarded works of theater centering around the AIDS epidemic from the 1980s through the early 2000s. All three plays, however, take different approaches in discussing AIDS and the politics surrounding the epidemic. Larry Kramer’s play *The Normal Heart* is a work of queer political theater that is strictly realistic: accurately representing the AIDS epidemic on the

stage, and not covering up what is happening in real life. In the foreword to *The Normal Heart*, Tony Kushner writes that “Kramer, not understanding that theater had ceased to be newsworthy, wrote a play that made news, made a difference, had an effect—not to win prizes or encomia in the press, nor to set the box office ablaze, but to catalyze his society, which we all know theater can’t do anymore, except on the rare occasions when it does” (Kushner vii). Instead of creating a piece of theater that forces the audience to suspend their disbelief and fully immerse themselves in the world of the play, in *The Normal Heart*, Kramer puts a mirror-image of the real world onto the stage, so that the audience cannot ignore the injustices done against, and lack of care for queer individuals. *Rent* (written by Jonathan Larson, a straight white man), while technically being a story about the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s, actually talks very little about how queer lives and black and brown queer lives in particular were disproportionately affected by the epidemic, instead focusing on love stories, and white men who do not want to give up their creative dreams by getting office jobs and being able to pay their rent. In her book on *Rent* and its cultural impact, Sarah Schulman writes that in the year that *Rent* came out, “there were plays that were by black women, by lesbians, by gay men; there were important works of art about AIDS, in particular, and the historic burden of morality in general. None of these works received the kind of praise that *Rent* received” (Schulman 45). All three of these plays were critically acclaimed and were commercially successful, to no coincidence that all of their playwrights were cisgender white men. What differs *Angels* from the other two plays, however, is its genre of magical realism instead of straight realism, and the diverse cast of characters (none of whom are used as sacrifices throughout the play for other characters to survive, such as Angel in *Rent*).

At the end of his essay on the intersections of queerness and Judaism in *Angels* in America, Jonathan Freedman claims that “the particular success of *Angels*, after all, is to speak at

once to multiple audiences—gay and straight; highbrow and middlebrow; socialist, Democratic, and even Republican—and to argue to those audiences for a mode of civic identity that includes rather than excludes, that creates rather than denies community” (98). While theater prior to the mid twentieth century was notably highbrow and inaccessible to many, *Angels* attempts to bridge the gaps among multiple identity groups, and to have content that is both a reflection of society, and a vision of future utopia, making the play accessible, as well as both culturally relevant and a form of theatrical escapism. On this topic, Freedman also quotes Savran’s claim that “what is most remarkable about the play is that it has managed, against all odds, to amass significant levels of both cultural and economic capital...it does so by its skill both in reactivating a sense of America as the utopian nation and mobilizing the principle of ambivalence to produce a vision of a once and future pluralist culture” (98). Thus, *Angels*’ broad scope of subject matter, reality and fantasy, and a multicultural cast mark it as something different from the rest of the theatrical cannon, and something worth paying attention to.

Roy Cohn’s School of Moxie and Hypocrisy

The final scene of Act One of *Millenium Approaches* takes place in the office of Roy Cohn’s doctor, Henry. At the outset of the scene, Henry gives Roy an in-depth description of HIV, including its symptoms, its effects on the immune system, and its fatality. While it can be deduced that this is Henry giving his patient a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, Roy Cohn’s role in the play thus far has been one that is highly representative of the political officials who either ignored or had very little care for the individuals who were afflicted by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, making it seem preposterous that such an individual would have this disease. Roy’s response echoes this preposterousness when he states, “this is very interesting, Mr. Wizard, but why the fuck are you telling me this?” (44). Henry goes on to state that he has

removed multiple Kaposi's sarcoma lesions from Roy's body, and that he also has swollen glands, and fungus under his fingernails, all of which are signs of HIV/AIDS. In response to this, Roy states that, "this disease...it mostly afflicts homosexuals and drug addicts...so why are you implying that I...what are you implying, Henry?" (44). Roy goes on to say that he is not a drug addict, so he can't have acquired AIDS via drug use, and that he isn't a hemophiliac, so he is not at a higher risk due to that condition, in doing this, he is manipulating Henry into giving him his diagnosis, however, he states that if Henry refers to Roy as a homosexual he will "proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do" (Kushner 45). In this moment, Roy is placing his political prowess and his public persona over his physical wellbeing, as it is more important for him to maintain his public image than it is to accept his condition and be deemed a hypocrite for performing homosexual acts, when he has been vocally homophobic throughout his career in the public eye. Roy's conviction against identifying as a homosexual due to his public image makes clear that the idea of family values is really a public performance of private life, and not an actual reflection of what occurs in the private sphere, instead the intimate public sphere is a fabrication of family life based on fantasies of what a family is expected to look like.

When Henry is about to give in and call Roy a homosexual, the stage directions indicate that "Roy's too scary. He tries a different approach" (45). This direction gives the reader/audience insight into Roy's character, as he is so staunch in his beliefs and such a strong presence, that he can make a medical professional hesitate to give an honest diagnosis. While Henry does say that Roy has AIDS, he refuses to call him a homosexual out of fear for the future of his career. Instead he says to Roy that "you have had sex with men, many many times, Roy, and one of them, or any number of them, has made you very sick. You have AIDS" (45). While

Roy does not deny his homosexual activity, he says that Henry is too focused on labels, and that just because a man has sex with other men does not make him a homosexual. Instead, he says, “all labels tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order?” (46). In this, quote Roy is conscious of the social hierarchy in which he is highly ingrained, and the importance of identity in where one is placed in said hierarchy, recognizing that a “straight” white man will be higher in the pecking order than a gay white man, especially one with AIDS.

Roy continues his monologue by claiming that ideology and sexuality do not actually define people, but “clout” does. He says that, “not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. but really this is wrong...homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?” (46) This quote indicates Roy’s hypocrisy in his condemnation of those who engage in homosexual activity, other than himself, but also a look into his psyche, seeing that in his mind, one’s actions can be distanced from one’s identity due to their role in society. This quote also seems to be a joke on Kushner’s part about the concept of identity politics, and how Roy does not believe in identity politics, but instead believes that one’s identity is one’s politics, thus explaining why he cannot associate with his homosexual acts, as they would potentially queer his political identification away from conservatism. This also shows the depth of his internalized homophobia in that he would never refer to himself as a homosexual due to the negative connotations surrounding the term and the role of the homosexual as a pariah in American society.

At the end of the scene, after Roy has given his sermon on why he is not a homosexual, because homosexuality, in his eyes, is based on status, and not on sexual acts, Henry says again that Roy has AIDS, to which Roy responds, “no, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer” (47). This both furthers Roy’s distancing of himself from other homosexuals, and echoes the real-life Roy Cohn who publicly stated that he had liver cancer when he was dying of AIDS. At the end of the scene, Henry says:

Well, whatever the fuck you have, Roy, it’s very serious, and I haven’t got a damn thing for you. The NIH in Bethesda has a new drug called AZT with a two-year waiting list that not even I can get you onto. So get on the phone, Roy, and dial the fifteen numbers, and tell the First Lady you need in on an experimental treatment for liver cancer, because you can call it any damn thing you want, Roy, but what it boils down to is very bad news.
(47)

Henry’s commands emphasize Roy’s physical condition, and dire diagnosis. While his position in society may give him access to medications that marginalized individuals with the same disease do not have the same access to, his clout and his public persona cannot change the fact that he has a disease that at the point in time of the play does not have a cure, or even reliable and readily accessible treatment methods. Roy may still be able to present himself as a person at the top of the pecking order, but based on his physical condition, he is in the same place as those he has actively marginalized and condemned.

In the first scene of Act Four of *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels in America*, we see Roy Cohn in his hospital room, with Joe Pitt, his protégé sitting across from him. Roy’s health has been rapidly declining, yet he is adamant about maintaining his authoritative presence. The stage directions at the start of the scene read that “Roy’s in a big hospital chair, the kind that

makes it possible for very sick people to sit upright briefly. The tube of an IV drip bag, hanging from a portable drip stand, runs into a vein in his arm. He's shockingly altered, in terrible shape...he forces himself to speak as normally as he can, using energy he doesn't have, to focus and stay connected" (209). In spite of the setting of the hospital room, Roy's upright position in the chair and commanding presence over Joe indicates his control in the situation. While the stage directions set up the scene of the play, the description of the room and the characterization also help to inform the power dynamics within the scene. Joe is still coming to Roy for advice and mentorship regardless of his physical state, indicating Roy's higher status in the relationship. In this section, Roy is visibly ailing, and coming closer to his demise due to his AIDS diagnosis, yet he still holds power over Joe, who is not physically ailing, but is, in Roy's eyes, weaker than he is. Roy has a presence and a sense of power in the room by sitting in the chair that holds him upright when he cannot do so himself, and Joe "sits in an ordinary chair, facing Roy" (209), positioning him directly in relation to Roy's feigned prowess.

Roy begins the scene by stating "if you want the smoke and puffery you can listen to Kissinger and Schultz and those guys, but if you want to look at the heart of modern conservatism, you look at me," (209). The first words spoken in the scene are Roy condemning other conservative political figures for not upholding their values, claiming that politicians such as Henry Kissinger and George Schultz has leaned away from their conservatism to a more centrist view (or, at least centrist in comparison to Cohn's devout conservatism). In bringing up Kissinger and Schultz, Roy is also making a comment on foreign diplomacy, as they were both Secretaries of State who aided in diplomacy with Communist countries (China and Russia, respectively.) In their association with Communism, Roy believes that the two politicians are

straying from American neo-conservatism, which has historically been anti-Communist (as seen with Roy's role in the McCarthy trials.)

At the end of his monologue on this topic, Roy says that "after I die, they'll say it was for the money and the headlines. But it was never the money: it's the moxie that counts. I never waived. You: remember" (210). In this Roy, is reinforcing his commitment to his conservative ideals (xenophobia and America-centrism in this case), not for fame or fortune, but because they are so deeply ingrained in his person that he has no other choice but to stand by them. This serves as a way of furthering his rejection of his diagnosis with AIDS, as homosexuality is in opposition to his political agenda, and his homophobia is so deeply internalized that he refuses to admit that he, himself is attracted to, and has sex with men, instead publicly claiming that he has liver cancer, so it doesn't ruin his public image. This also functions as a premonition of sorts for the rest of the scene, when Joe tells Roy that he has left his wife and has been living with another man, the audience is already aware that Roy is going to react negatively due to his political ideology, in spite of his own homosexual tendencies.

After Roy's monologue on conservatism and moxie, Joe tells Roy that he has left his wife, and has been living with someone else. Roy assumes this person is a woman, and then asks Joe if he had gotten a blessing from his father before he died. At the beginning of the play, Joe talks about the poor relationship he had with his father, and that he always felt as if his father was disappointed in him, which is what led to him being mentored by Roy, and thinking of him as a sort of father figure. Considering the importance of family values in politics at this point in history, Roy takes on the role of a proxy father for Joe, and gives him the blessing that his father never gave him, so he can continue to live his life without fearing disapproval from older male figures, and abide by socially constructed norms of familial importance. The stage directions

state that “Roy motions for Joe to come over, then for him to kneel. Joe hesitates, then kneels. Roy puts his hand on Joe’s forehead. Joe leans the weight of his head into Roy’s hand. They both close their eyes and enjoy it for a moment” (211). This action expresses Roy’s role as a paternal figure in Joe’s life, and also invokes religious imagery, marking Roy as a person who is divine or holy in Joe’s eyes. This moment shows a rare tender side to Roy, by showing his care for Joe and giving him his blessing in life, however, there is an undercurrent throughout the whole scene of Roy’s desire for power over others. While he is serving as a fatherly figure in this moment, he is doing so to maintain control over Joe, to manipulate him into following the same path in life that he has. In this moment, Joe assumes that Roy will still support him in spite of his homosexuality, as he believes that Roy cares for him on a quasi-familial level, not just on a professional level.

Once Joe has received Roy’s blessing, he tells Roy that he has been living with another man for a few weeks, and that he never thought he would tell anyone, but he knows that Roy cares for him, so he assumes a level of trust and understanding. In an almost robotic state, unresponsive to Joe’s remarks Roy stands up and “walks unsteadily. The IV tube in his arm extends to its full length and then pulls. Roy looks down at it, remembering it’s there. In a calm, disinterested manner he pulls it out of his arm, which starts bleeding profusely” (213). As Roy begins to walk out of the room while bleeding, his nurse, Belize, comes in to help him, and Joe tells him to sit back down, prompting Roy to tell Belize to get away from him and for Joe to go back home to his wife, and to cut off any relationship he has with the man he has been living with. Joe responds by saying that he needs to be with him, to which Roy exclaims “YOU NEED? Listen to me, you do what I say. Or you will regret it...and don’t talk to me about it ever again...I...never saw that coming. You kill me...you already got my blessing—WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT FROM ME? (214-215). While Roy’s exclamations against Joe’s homosexual

relationship express his conservative ideals and his public homophobia, he is also profusely bleeding out of his arm throughout this whole sequence, which shows his physical weakness juxtaposed with his ideological rigidity, as well as the fact that he, and his blood, are infected by AIDS. Frank Rich writes about the depiction of this scene in the HBO miniseries adaptation of *Angels*, stating that Roy Cohn, among other closeted homosexuals in Reagan's inner circle "were more terrified of being forced out of the closet than of AIDS" (3). This reinforces the hypocrisy on Roy's behalf, as he is dying from a disease that was widely associated with homosexuality, and he contracted the disease from homosexual sex, yet he refuses to identify with his homosexuality, publicly practicing homophobic rhetoric instead, and refuses to support his protégé in discovering his homosexuality.

Alex Tuss has discussed the different forms of masculinity embodied within the text of *Angels in America*. One example he delves into in particular is Roy Cohn and the "gospel of clout," which involves his unwillingness to admit to his homosexuality or societal deviance, as well as his AIDS diagnosis, as it will take away from his power as a high profile political figure. Tuss writes that "Kushner portrays the crisis of beliefs and values in the America of the 1980s through the lives of Roy Cohn, the personification of the iconic power system the play criticizes as a spiritual wasteland, and those of a number of gay men whose personal revivals intertwine with the larger awakening that the drama builds toward" (1). Thus, claiming that Roy is representative of the neoconservative Reaganite political regime of the late 1980s (leading into the 1990s with Bush), and the other gay male characters representing the people directly affected by the Othering of queer people under the regime.

This dynamic is distinctly shown in the scene with Roy and Joe in Roy's hospital room, as Roy is upholding the oppressive conservative political regime of the late 1980s/early 1990s by

way of his blatant homophobia and disregard for the lives of queer individuals. However, Tuss mostly describes Roy in terms of upholding the system, and only looking out for himself, and not for anyone else (specifically gay men), yet this is troubled by the fact that Roy is dying of AIDS in the midst of the AIDS crisis, which directly affected many of the people oppressed under neoconservative political regimes. Roy's political beliefs are in opposition with homosexuality as part of his upholding of the neoconservative ideology of family values, but he is also inextricably linked to those who he has actively oppressed with his political practices. While Roy is undoubtedly aligned with the conservative ideals of family values and the hailing of masculinity and maleness as the pinnacle of social hierarchy that goes along with it, he is also depicted as physically and morally weak via his AIDS diagnosis. Thus, Roy's role in the play is more nuanced than just serving as a representation of the gospel of clout and the specific form of masculinity that goes along with it.

Joe and Harper Pitt: A "Pretend-Happy" Family

Angels in America has a notably diverse cast representing different races, genders, sexualities, political affiliations, and religions. Joe and Harper Pitt, however, are the most normative characters according to American sociopolitical hegemony: Joe and Harper are a white, heterosexual, married couple with a stable income, they are religious, and they vote Republican. Harper is a housewife, and Joe has a good job working as a clerk at the U.S. Court of Appeals, and at the beginning of the play is offered a promotion to move to Washington, D.C. Thus, upon first glance, Joe and Harper appear to be a perfect representation of the family that is deemed central to the American tradition of involving family values into politics.

Joe and Harper function as the supericonic figures at the center of American politics which Lauren Berlant discusses in her introduction on family values and the intimate public

sphere in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*. Berlant writes about the aim of normative groups to silence the voices of groups who have been deemed Other, as the presence of those groups is said to take away the iconicity of those who have always been “normal” in American society. Berlant writes that:

“today many formerly iconic citizens who used to feel undefensive and unfettered feel truly exposed and vulnerable. They feel anxious about their value to themselves, their families, their publics, and their nation. They sense that they now have identities, when it used to be just other people who had them...to effect either restoration of the imagined nation, the American ex-icon denigrated the political present tense and incites nostalgia for the world as a utopian horizon of political aspiration” (2).

In bringing up the sense of nostalgia for a past iteration of American society, prior to the threat of multiculturalism, and the imposition of identity onto the dominant group, Berlant sets up the idea of family values being important in American politics in the 1990s. These family values are ones which uphold a very specific type of family, one that is white, heterosexual, at least upper middle class, and Christian, marking person that deviates from those expectations as a threat to the family unit, and, in turn, to America itself. Berlant goes on to state that her argument “tracks the triumph of the Reaganite view that the intimacy of citizenship is something scarce and sacred, private and proper, and only for members of families. It focuses on the ways conservative ideology has convinced a citizenry that the core context of politics should be the sphere of private life” (3). Thus, Berlant says that in the political context in which the play is based (during Reagan’s presidency), there is a direct correlation between family and citizenship, placing those who abide by the imposed norms of the American family as model citizens.

Kushner sets up *Angels in America* by having Harper and Joe act as the representation of the normative American family within the play. However, the Pitts are Mormons (a religion that is normative in that it is a form of Christianity, but is on the outskirts of the religion), the couple do not have children (thus not fitting the idea of the nuclear family with a mother, a father, and 2.5 children), Harper is a Valium addict (which prevents her from doing her duties as a doting housewife), and Joe is a closeted homosexual. While the play introduces the pair as a potential representation of a “normal” American family, Kushner almost immediately subverts that notion by revealing the dysfunction of the Pitt family unit. In turn, the play criticizes the idealization of a specific type of a family by showing the instability of the family unit that is lauded by the Reaganite conservative regime. This subversion shows the play’s function in queering the aspects of family values central to the intimate public sphere, not marking the play as separate from the intimate public sphere, but a response to the conservative politics.

Toward the beginning of the play Joe and Harper are portrayed as a fully functioning family unit, representing the family at the center of the intimate public sphere. This portrayal is subverted very quickly however, when it becomes clear to the reader that Harper is putting on a performance of being a housewife in order to fit in to her expected role, and Joe performs masculinity to fit into his. In Scene 5 of Act One of *Millennium Approaches*, we see Joe and Harper interact for the first time in the play, after being introduced to Joe individually in his meeting with Roy Cohn, and the subsequent scene where we see Harper in a Valium-induced dream sequence. The scene begins with Joe telling Harper that he has received a promotion, which would include the pair moving to D.C., and that he is excited about this opportunity because it may allow him to move on from just being a clerk to being involved in policymaking. While Joe sees this move as having great potential for the couple and his career, Harper, an

agoraphobic, is afraid of leaving the house she has become comfortable in to move to a new city, and has a fear that she and Joe will grow further apart if their stations in life change from what they are currently. Toward the end of the scene, Joe states that he thinks things are beginning to change in the world “for the good. Change for the good. America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing...that’s what President Reagan’s done, Harper. He says: ‘truth exists and can be spoken proudly’” (26). This quote furthers Joe’s political alignment with Reagan’s ideals and America centrism, and also uses the changing nature of America as a way to convince Harper to move to D.C. instead of addressing their individual problems, because if America undergoes positive change, so can their relationship. The scene ends with Joe claiming that Harper doesn’t know anything about the world because she stays in the house all day and has emotional problems, to which Harper responds “...I DO NOT have emotional problems...and if I do have emotional problems it’s from living with you...if you think I do then you should never have married me. you have all these secrets and lies,” Joe then says, “I want to be married to you, Harper” (7). While this scene establishes the instability and lack of trust in Harper and Joe’s relationship, it also allows room for a possibility of repair, and a desire for the marriage to work in spite of their issues.

In Scene 8 of Act One of the play, just a few pages after the previous scene with Harper and Joe, we see Harper alone in the apartment waiting for Joe to come home. Harper has just experienced what she assumes to be a Valium-induced hallucination, in which she meets Prior and they, through a “blue streak of recognition” are able to tell each other truths about their lives which their waking selves do not know. Harper tells Prior that there is one part of him deep down that is without disease, and Prior tells Harper that her husband is a homosexual. She

refuses to believe that is true, and then exits the fantastical dream-space, leading into Scene 8.

The scene begins with Harper asking where Joe has been, and him responding that he has been out, thinking (we later find out that when he goes on long walks at night he is going to cruising spots where gay men would pick up other gay men for sex). Harper then states that she burned dinner, “not my dinner. My dinner was fine. Your dinner. I put it back in the oven and turned everything up as high as it could go and I watched till it burned black...It just seemed like the kind of thing a mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping housewife would do” (36). This quote shows Harper’s awareness of the expectations placed upon her as a housewife, and also her inability to perform those actions due to her drug abuse and lack of fulfillment in her marriage. Harper’s lines also indicate the downward slope which the relationship will take throughout the rest of the play.

Joe goes on to ask how many pills Harper took that day, and she replies that it doesn’t matter, and that he should stick to the subject. She then exclaims “I WANT TO KNOW WHERE YOU’VE BEEN I WANT TO KNOW WHAT’S GOING ON!” (36). Joe, knowing that Harper is asking why he goes on long walks every night and leaves her alone in the apartment, where she is afraid that there are ghosts or strange men there who will hurt her, tries to divert the conversation by talking about the job offer in D.C. When Joe starts to get agitated by Harper’s indirect questioning, she states that he always seems unfamiliar to her when he comes home after his walks, and that he terrifies her. She goes on to say, “you think you’re the only one who hates sex; I do; I hate it with you; I do. I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces. It’s like a punishment. It was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you—(she stops herself) it’s a sin, and it’s killing us both” (37). This quote invokes the religious (and political) rhetoric surrounding homosexuality and its sinfulness, but also has Harper put

blame on herself for partaking in a marriage with a person who is a closeted homosexual, as she believes it was immoral for her to marry Joe if a part of her always knew that he was gay.

Joe continues to get frustrated by Harper not speaking her mind outright and forces her to ask him what she is insinuating, to which she asks “are you a homo?” (38). While he denies Harpers accusations at first, throughout the rest of the scene he begins to break down, showing his internalized shame for his latent homosexuality, and performance of masculinity that is expected of him as a “straight” white Republican man. In response to Harper’s questioning, Joe states:

“does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me? What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God’s sake, there’s nothing left, I’m a shell. There’s nothing left to kill. As long as my behavior is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God...All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become good and you want to destroy that. You want to destroy me, but I am not going to let you do that” (40-41).

Joe’s rhetoric speaks to his internalized homophobia via his Reaganite neo-conservative politics and his religious upbringing, in refusing to embrace his homosexuality, and instead trying to kill it, as it is immoral and socially deviant according to his political and religious ideologies. He is also performing a specific type of masculinity, in claiming that homosexuality and being a “good” man are mutually exclusive, and that being a good and hardworking man (who also represses his emotions and desires) is a set of personality traits reserved for “straight” family men.

Throughout this scene both Harper and Joe seem to be aware of the performativity of the roles of wife and husband that they partake in. Joe has to be the breadwinner who is emotionally detached, has a sense of strength and machismo, and Harper has to maintain the home and provide support for her husband. While the two are aware of the expectations that are imposed upon them as the idealized family unit, the fact that both of them are incapable of upholding their respective responsibilities shows the instability of the normative family idealized under the conservative idea of “family values,” and that the roles themselves do not actually reflect reality, but more so an unrealistic archetype of what a family “should” look like.

“Fuck you, I’m a prophet!”: Prior Walter and Queer Futurity

If in the construction of family values within *Angels*, Roy represents the patriarch who is upholding the pillars of “straightness,” whiteness, and maleness in the American intimate public sphere, and Joe and Harper are the family at the center of the debate of family values’ role in politics, then Prior Walter represents the figure of the child. Prior, as the child within the intimate public sphere represents progress and the future of the country, but as a gay man with AIDS, cannot procreate and further the normative notions of family in the United States. Thus, Prior’s role as both the gay prophet and the child queers the notion of liberal multiculturalism, and aspects such as homosexuality being antithetical to the future of the American children.

In her discussion of the intimate public sphere and the role of family values in politics, Lauren Berlant argues that the conservative ideology that straight white maleness is under attack by liberal multiculturalism masquerades itself as looking out for the future of America: the unborn fetus and the child. Berlant writes that the image of the child is central to the debate of what is or is not appropriate to be addressed in the intimate public sphere, basic visibility of marginalized groups (or lack thereof) on their potential threat to the livelihood of the future of

straight, white America. On this topic Berlant claims that what marks the child as an iconic image of the future of America is that it is “perhaps the last living American, not yet bruised by history: not yet caught up in the processes of secularization and sexualization; not yet caught in the confusing and exciting identity changes made possible by mass consumption and ethnic, racial, and sexual mixing; not yet tainted by money or war” (6). The child is such an iconic figure due to its innocence and lack of agency, making it a figure that can be controlled by and spoken for by conservative republican politicians. By making the image of the child something in opposition to secularization, sexualization, and mixing of races and sexuality, the child that conservative politicians are thinking of as the future of America is one that is clearly white, cisgender, straight, and following all other sociopolitical hierarchies. On the figure of the child within the intimate public sphere, Berlant goes on to state that “the abstract image of the future generated by the national culture machine also stands for a crisis in the present: what gets consolidated now as the future modal citizen provides an alibi or an inspiration for the moralized political rhetorics of the present and for reactionary legislative and juridical practice” (Berlant 6). Thus, Berlant claims that thinking of American society in terms of the future provides an excuse for conservative politicians to enact reactionary policy that further Others marginalized group, in the name of providing a better future for children who belong to the sociopolitical hegemony.

Prior Walter is a character who both seems to exist outside of the realm of family values within the play, while also being inextricably tied to them. Prior is one of the few characters who interacts with the divine and the fantastical in the play, but is also a gay man who is dying of AIDS: making him someone who is in touch with the theatrical conventions of magical realism, and also the politics of the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s, due to his status as a marginalized individual. David Savran remarks on Prior as a character full of contradictions,

stating that his role in the play pairs history with an impossible future (in that Prior comes from an ancient line of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, but also has a ‘most inner part, entirely free of disease’ (34) in spite of his AIDS diagnosis and worsening condition throughout the text. Savran also states that “Prior’s very name designates his temporal dislocation, the fact that he is at once too soon and belated, both that which anticipates and that which provides an epilogue (to the Walter family, if nothing else, since he seems to mark the end of the line)” (211). Prior’s character toys with the function of time within the play, as he is a representation of the past and the future via his long family lineage, and his connection with the divine which allows for him to have a say in whether or not humanity will continue to progress. This concept queers the idea of the child being a symbol of the future, as the character who is in control of the future is a marginalized individual, and not the straight white child that is imagined by conservative politicians in invoking the image of the child’s innocence, in the fact that Prior is linked to the past (via his name, both in the meaning of the word Prior, and the fact that he is the 34th Prior Walter in his family), and in the fact that queer individuals are often associated with a lack of futurity, due to the inability to procreate.

Prior’s role as a prophet and his association with temporality within the play is first introduced in Act Three Scene 1 in *Millennium Approaches*. In this scene, Prior is woken up by the spectral figures of a 13th century British squire holding a scythe, and a 17th century Londoner. The reader immediately finds out that these two ghost messengers are also named Prior Walter (the 5th and 17th of their name, to our Prior’s 34th of the name). Prior, in shock that he is seeing the ghosts of two of his ancestors, asks why they have come to him, to which Prior 1 says that the messenger is coming, and Prior 2 says “they chose us, I suspect, because of the mortal affinities. In a family as long-descended as the Walters there are bound to be a few carried off

with the plague” (91). This quote reveals that Prior has been chosen to have a form of second sight, and in Prior 2 saying that they had all been chosen as prophets after they had either succumbed to disease, or been diagnosed with a fatal disease (the early Priors having a form of the plague, and our Prior having AIDS, a modern plague). Most of the rest of the scene continues with the prior Priors talking about how they died, and how they were surrounded by their children and loved ones at the time of their death. This detail functions in furthering the idea that Prior does not have a sense of futurity in the way that heterosexual individuals do, as they can procreate and see that their children live in a better world than they did. At the end of the scene, however, Prior 2 says to Prior “prophet. Seer. Revelator. It’s a great honor to the family,” to which Prior 1 says, “he hasn’t got a family,” and Prior 2 responds “I meant for the Walters, for the family in the greater sense” (92). Prior 2’s quote about Prior’s work being an honor for the family in a greater sense takes the impetus off of the unborn child to be the future of the nation, instead making Prior and his diseased queer body as a kind of future, even if that future is death and not procreation. Thus, shifting the image of the child in the intimate public sphere from one that is an image of hope, to one that is an image of prophecy and knowledge, but also potential demise. This relates to Berlant’s discussion of identity, and how it is not something that is concrete, but something that is both a representation of the past and the future (just as Prior is within the play). Berlant writes that, the generational idea of family has “provided a logic of the national future. When the modal form of the citizen is called into question, when it is no longer a straight, white reproductively inclined heterosexual but rather might be anything, any jumble of things, the logic of the national future comes into crisis” (18). This scene as well as Prior’s presence throughout the play show the idea of anyone other than a “white reproductively inclined heterosexual” providing to the future of the nation, as Prior is not reproductively furthering the

nation, but is the future of a long descended American family lineage, and holds the future of American society in his hands due to his prophetic powers.

After learning about his prophetic powers which have stemmed out of his family lineage as well as his disease, Prior has a series of encounters with the angel America who tells him what his role consists of as a prophet. In Scene 2 of Act 2 of *Perestroika*, Prior tells his friend Belize about the dream he has in which the angel visits him to tell him about his prophetic responsibilities. At the beginning of the scene, the Angel (as recounted by Prior) tells Prior that he must tell the human race to stop migrating, moving and progressing, because God has abandoned the divine principalities, and maybe if he abandons earth he will return to the divine realm. The Angel tells Prior that, “YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST STOP MOVING! ...if you do not MINGLE you will cease to Progress. Seek Not to Fathom the World and its Delicate Particle Logic: You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy, You Do not ‘advance,’ You only Trample” (172). In this quote, the Angel says that there can no longer be any mixing or intermarrying among the human race, as well as no more migration, upholding ideals of white supremacy and xenophobia, and echoing the ideals of family values, which also promote whiteness over marginalized groups. To this Prior responds “stop moving. That’s what you want. Answer me! You want me dead” (173). Thus, Prior claims that in spite of him being given the gift of prophecy, he is still plagued with AIDS, which denotes that he will most likely die if he does not get the proper treatment, and the reactionary politics and lack of progress that the Angel is hoping for which inevitably lead to Prior’s demise, and the demise of his fellow humans.

In having Prior reject the Angel's death wish, he is, however, promoting his own futurity in a way that is not typically allowed for queer individuals. In his essay on queer individuals and the lack of future associated with queerness, Lee Edelman states that:

“it is true that the ranks of lesbian, gay, transsexual, and transgendered parents grow larger every day, and that nothing intrinsic to the constitution of those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, or queer predisposes them to resist the appeal of futurity, to refuse the temptation to reproduce, or to place themselves outside or against the acculturating logic of the symbolic... But politics, construed as oppositional or not, never rests on essential identities. It centers, instead, on the figurality that is always essential to identity, and thus on the figural relations in which social identities are always inscribed” (17).

Thus, Edelman claims that there is nothing about the queer individual that positions them as opposites to futurity other than the lesser probability of queer individuals having biological offspring than heterosexual individuals. He goes on to say, however, that politics make queer individuals oppositional to the societal norm as a way of maintaining white cisgender heterosexual male hegemony. Prior's refusal to stop moving and progressing disrupts the association of queer individuals with a lack of futurity, as he is actually ensuring that he and his fellow marginalized individuals continue toward progress and refuse to submit to reactionary politics. It is at the end of the play when Prior goes up to heaven to speak with the Angels and refuses their agenda for the human race to stop progressing that he is able to be well again, succumbing to the part of himself that is entirely free of disease, as Harper pointed to in the beginning of the play. By acting in opposition to the oppressive forces representative of family values and conservative politics, Prior is able to be well at the end of the play, showing the

importance of progression and multiculturalism in opposition to stagnation or reactionary political regimes.

Conclusion: The Great Work Begins

Throughout *Angels in America*, many of the central characters function as archetypes of figures surrounding American politics in the late 1980s and the early 1990s: Roy Cohn as the patriarch, Joe and Harper Pitt as the normal American family, and Prior Walter as the child, the future of American society. Most of these characters, however, are not simply left on a caricatured level of satirizing the American political climate of the time, but are three dimensional, experience change over the course of the play, and break free from the mold of societal norms. Joe and Harper never make it on their pilgrimage to D.C., which would have cemented their stature in American sociopolitical hierarchy and Joe's role as a patriarch. Instead, the pair split up, Joe pursues his first homosexual relationship, but is left alone after Louis (his partner) sees that he still has internalized homophobia due to his Mormon upbringing and conservative politics, whereas Harper leaves New York City to move to San Francisco, breaking free from her duties of being a housewife and her agoraphobia tied to her unhealthy and loveless marriage. Prior rejects his role as a prophet, and insists that people must continue to progress toward a society in which queer individuals, people of color, and women, among other marginalized groups, are no longer deemed Other or lesser than the hegemonic class of straight, white men. Roy Cohn, the only character in the play who resembles a real life public figure, however, does not get the same character development and breaking from the mold that the other fictional characters do. Roy, both in actual American society and the context of the play dies from AIDS after being disbarred due to unethical conduct during his legal career. Thus, the pillar of the conservative political regime of the 1980s and 1990s within the play does not get a sense

of justice or penance for his wrongdoing and his lack of ethics, but is punished for his sins—a final dismantling of family values on Kushner’s part.

Although Kushner consistently criticizes the white male conservative fantasy of the family unit being under attack by liberal multiculturalism throughout his play, the play ends with an epilogue in which Prior (a gay prophet and AIDS survivor), Louis (a gay Jewish man, and Prior’s ex-partner), Hannah (a Mormon woman, and Joe’s mother), and Belize (a gay black drag queen, and Roy Cohn’s former nurse) gather together as a newly formed family unit. Aside from Prior, those who represent the aspects of “family values” are not present in the final scene thus, as Jonathan Freedman says, “Prior might live to preside over the new queer postnuclear family, at least for the space of the theatrical enactment” (98). In dismantling the concept of the nuclear family, and taking away importance of the straightness, whiteness and maleness of the institution, Kushner does not completely imagine a world in which the family unit is not important. Instead, Kushner reimagines the family unit: creating one that is diverse in gender, race, sexuality, religion, and ability: redefining what a family can consist of, and what family values mean at the turn of the 21st century. *Angels in America*’s progressiveness, innovation, and importance as a 1990s text lies in its critique of American politics and society during the AIDS epidemic and leading into the new millennium, yet its cultural impact and staying power exists in its desire for progress and inclusivity on a national scale.

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